

Norman wine in medieval times

By [Marie Lebert](#), version of 15 October 2016.



Normandy, a region in northwest France, is a former wine region, a fact that might surprise many, because Normandy is known as a cider region. But Normandy was a region of vineyards (and wine) before being a region of apple trees (and cider). Vineyards were ubiquitous on the slopes of Norman hills in the 11th and 12th centuries, before apple trees started to steadily replace vineyards in the 13th century.

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The location of Norman vineyards



Grape vines were probably imported to Normandy since Roman times, and surely imported to Normandy from the 7th century. Many Norman vineyards were present in the 11th and 12th centuries under the Dukes of Normandy, for the production of ecclesiastical wine (communion wine and abbey wine) and secular wine (table wine... for wealthy tables). The history of Norman vineyards belongs to both religious history and popular history, like for many medieval topics.

The vineyards could be found on most Norman slopes exposed to the sun, except in the Cotentin region, probably too rainy. The three major wine areas were the Seine valley (between Vernon and Andelys), the hills of Argences (east and south-east of Caen) and the Avranches region (also called Avranchin – especially in Genêts, in Val-Saint-Père and in Saint-Jean-le-Thomas).

Other vineyards were present in Longueville (Calvados), in the Perche (Orne) and in Jumièges (Seine-Maritime). Unsurprisingly, the vineyards were often situated near a renowned abbey. The main vineyards belonged to the Church as the properties of Norman abbeys or cathedrals. For example, the

vineyards of Saint-Jean-le-Thomas belonged to the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey and the vineyards of the hills of Argences belonged to the Abbey of Fécamp. But there were also small non religious vineyards alongside fruit trees and cereal fields.

Churches needed wine not only for priests saying the Mass but also for the faithful who were receiving the Communion in both ways (bread and wine) until the 13th century. A good table wine was also mandatory to accompany the meals organised by bishops and abbots in order to honour their guests. While the monks of Mont Saint-Michel drank cider and water during the week, they were also drinking wine on Sundays and on religious holidays.



Norman wine was exported to England, since England was part of the Norman Duchy since the Battle of Hastings in 1066. One year before the battle, when the Normans were building the 696 boats (according to Wace in the “Roman de Rou”) needed to cross the Channel, 36 (?) hectolitres of wine were delivered on site for daily consumption, as well as 100,000 litres of water to share with the horses. On the Bayeux Tapestry, a wine barrel (bound with iron circles and topped by halberds) pulled by two men is shown in front of the troops on foot and on horseback on their way to England, just behind William the Conqueror, before the troops board the boats to cross the Channel.

The reputation of Norman wines



In the Middle Ages, wine making was not very elaborate. Wine was kept in rudimentary barrels and seldom lasted beyond the current year without turning into vinegar. Old wine diluted with water was given to servants and soldiers. The glass bottle was invented much later, in the late 17th century.

There are certainly historical sources celebrating the qualities and virtues of the medieval Norman wine, but they are difficult to find. Most sources state that Norman wines were average if not bad wines.



In the 13th century, the Argences wine had a bad mark in the “Battle of the Wines” (“La Bataille des Vins”), a long poem composed in 1224 by Henry d’Andeli and often regarded as the first wine guide in the world. This famous poem tells the story of a fictional wine tasting organised by the French King Philip Augustus. Over 70 samples from France (including the wines of Chablis, Saint-Emilion and Bordeaux) and Europe (including the wines of Cyprus, Spain and the Mosel region) were tasted and judged. A sweet wine from Cyprus (believed much later to be Commandaria) won the overall tasting.

In the 15th century, Olivier Basselin, author of a well-known drinking song (called a “vau-de-vire” in Old French), even spoke of the “slice-gut wine of Avranches”. The same wine was also known as the “wine of four men” since three men were needed to force the fourth man to drink, because the wine was very bad. This story was related again in 1996 by the Prior of the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey himself. Is it a true story or a legend, to invite people to drink cider? The wine of Brion, produced near Avranches in an abbey belonging to Mont Saint-Michel, didn’t have a good reputation either. The monks of Mont Saint-Michel left it to their servants to avoid drinking it.

The decline of Norman vineyards



The production of Norman wine began to decline during the second half of the 12th century. Other French wine regions had wines of better quality and there were more commercial exchanges between regions. When Normandy became part of the Plantagenet Empire (that was ruling the whole western France – north, centre and south – as well as part of England and part of Ireland) in 1154, the

Normans started receiving the wines of the Loire and Bordeaux. When Normandy was conquered by the French King Philip Augustus and became part of the Kingdom of France in 1204, these wines are replaced by the wines of Île-de-France (the region around Paris) and Burgundy.

Why did Norman vineyards decline over time? Some historians suggest a less mild climate and even a climatic cooling in the late Middle Ages, while other historians mention the influence of forest clearing and deforestation on soil conditions.

Although there were still some vineyards in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Normans imported more and more wines instead of producing them, and began drinking cider. Wine production stopped in Avranchin in the 15th century, and in Perche in the 16th century. The few remaining Norman vineyards disappeared after the ravages of phylloxera in the second half of the 19th century, like in many French wine regions.

Unlike other French regions that started wine production again after defeating phylloxera, Normandy has now favoured apple trees and cider, except for a commercial vineyard (called "Les Arpents du Soleil") in Grisy (Calvados) since 1995 and two micro-vineyards run by wine lovers in Gaillon (Eure) and Avranches (Manche) since 2012.

The rise of apples and cider



When did apple orchards appear in the Norman landscape? The cultivated apple tree – with its apple, now one of the main emblems of Normandy – is difficult to date. The first apple trees were imported from the Basque country and grew well on Norman soil, sometimes described as light and slightly acid, with the help of an oceanic climate.

Apple donations to abbeys were mentioned in the late 12th century, in order to produce cider, and the production of cider was also mentioned in the chores the lords were requiring from their servants. Thus apple trees were already present in Normandy at this time, and perhaps even before.

After being an exception in a region with many vineyards, the apple orchards began spreading on Norman slopes, and the movement increased through the centuries. The hope of a good apple crop replaced the anxiety of a wine grape harvest spoiled by rain. In addition, apples required less work than grapes.

But the switch from grapes to apples did not happen in one day, and was not homogeneous. Cider was still unknown in the Eure region while it was abundant (with wine) in the cellars of the castles of Cotentin and Avranchin. Both productions (wine and cider) coexisted for several decades and some wine presses were used both for the making of wine and the making of cider.

While the cider seemed to be already widespread in the 16th century, it undoubtedly became the regional drink in the 18th century. "In Caen, in 1733, the cabarets of the city sell 1.005 glasses of wine against 42.916 glasses of cider, meaning 40 times more," Jean-Claude Viel recounted in his book. But clients had to wait for two centuries more to start drinking beer, including Norman beer.

A short bibliography

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